

Eat to Compete

Going “slow” saves time

Karen Armstrong RD

Active families need good food fast. Using a slow cooker to make meals will save time at dinner and give your family a hearty meal. Slow cookers are available in sizes ranging from 1 quart to 6 quarts and most have a low and high temperature setting. The larger models are great for families.

Slow cookers are great for cooking hearty soups, stews, chili, even pot roasts. The slow cooking allows flavours to fully develop and tenderizes meats so your meal will be truly delicious. The less expensive and less tender cuts of meat are perfect for slow cooking so using a slow cooker can save a little on your grocery bills. Slow cookers also use less energy than cooking a meal in the oven.

Here are some tips for using a slow cooker:

- Always use poultry and meats that are fresh or completely thawed.
- Do all the slicing and dicing the night before. Put the vegetables in one container and raw meat in another container and store them in the fridge overnight.
- Cook ground meats until no pink remains before putting them in the slow cooker. If you're cooking the ground meat the night before, cool it for 10-15 minutes at room temperature then store it in the fridge.
- Preheat the slow cooker before adding the ingredients.
- Vegetables cook more slowly so put them closest to the heat – on the bottom and the sides of the slow cooker.
- The liquid (water, juice, broth) should almost cover the rest of the ingredients.
- Fill the slow cooker to at least half full but not more than 2/3 full. If you have a large slow cooker, you may need to double your recipe.
- No peeking during cooking – every time you lift the lid, you add another 30 minutes to the cooking time. No stirring either.
- If there are leftovers, take them out of the slow cooker and put them in shallow containers to cool. Refrigerate until for up to 3 days or freeze.
- Read the manufacturer's guide for your slow cooker.

If you have an older slow cooker or one you haven't used in a while, you need to test it to make sure it's still heating properly. Fill the slow cooker one-half to two-thirds full of tap water then heat on a low setting for 8 hours with the lid on. Check the water temperature with an accurate food thermometer. Do this quickly because the temperature drops 10 - 15 degrees when the lid is raised or removed. The temperature of the water should be 185°F. Temperatures below this mean the slow cooker does not heat food high enough or fast enough to avoid potential food safety problems; the slow cooker is unsafe and should be replaced.

Slow cookers have really made a comeback in the last few years so you can find great slow cooker recipe books in the stores. The internet is another great place to look for slow cooker meal ideas.

Karen Armstrong is a Registered Dietitian with Manitoba Chicken Producers (www.chicken.mb.ca). She's an age group triathlete, masters swimmer, recreational skijorer and parent of a competitive swimmer. Look for more tips and information on eating to compete in upcoming issues of Coaches Clipboard. Karen can be reached at karmstrong@chicken.mb.ca.